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SUBJECT: BELARUS: DEMOCRATIC FORCES ON PRACTICAL TRACK AFTER FLAWED
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: VILNIUS 804 AND PREVIOUS

Summary

1. (SBU) The GOB did its critics and the opposition a huge favor by failing to deliver on promises of improved conditions for the September parliamentary elections. It is entirely possible that the flawed conduct of the elections and exclusion of all opposition members from the next parliament will lead to even greater consolidation of Belarus' democratic forces. In the post-election period, the opposition is wary of positive steps that might be made by the U.S. and/or EU, but recognizes that such steps would be temporary and would be tied to the August 2008 releases of the last political prisoners -- and other possible concrete steps by the GOB -- rather than the failed elections. End summary.

2. (SBU) The conduct of Belarus' September 2008 parliamentary elections served to repudiate those persons inside and outside Belarus who were convinced that there would be significant improvements over previous polling. In particular, the classic obstruction of any true observation of the vote count confirmed that promises of improved electoral conditions were not met. (Foreign and domestic observers, in all but a few cases, were kept at least two meters from the tables where ballots were counted, and what little line-of-sight view existed was blocked by electoral commission members as they stood shuffling ballots. This was documented by the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission and seen by the Embassy's two accredited observers as well.) The absence of any opposition members in the parliament -- rumors had indicated perhaps five or six more pliable politicians might be planted by the regime -- has been seen as a further blow to the idea that Lukashenka was prepared to make overtures to his political opponents.

3. (SBU) For its part, the opposition seems to be dealing with the situation fairly well. The complete defeat of all of their candidates has strengthened their unity; importantly, they have at last learned the futility of boycotting the polls. In a October 1 meeting with Charge, PAO, EUR/UMB Belarus desk officer Joe Wang, and DRL officer Rozina Damanwala, several opposition party leaders from the United Democratic Forces (UDF) noted that participating through the entire electoral process gave them 1) the opportunity to observe and report concerns and 2) maximum possibilities to demonstrate their existence and commitment to the Belarusian electorate. Furthermore, given anecdotal indications that despite the official results the opposition candidates actually received a large number of votes, the UDF leaders believe that the GOB is reeling from the knowledge that so many Belarusians voted for opposition candidates.

4. (SBU) During the October 1 meeting, former political prisoner and 2006 presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin -- just back from pre-election meetings in the U.S. including a luncheon with President Bush -- described his plans to work with the UDF and to travel jointly with former presidential rival Alyaksandr Milinkevich to selected European capitals. (Comment: This is an important development, as Kazulin had avoided collaborating with the UDF in

the 2006 presidential elections. End comment.) Belarusian Christian Democracy chair Pavel Sevyarynets advocated quick expansion of the UDF to include the "European Belarus" coalition of Mikola Statkevich and others; most participants felt that trying to bring the entire opposition together too precipitously would not have positive results.

¶5. (SBU) UDF leaders, Kazulin in particular, exulted to us that certain EU member states and diplomats who had predicted satisfactory electoral conditions had been wrong in their optimism. They are wary of the fact that EU responses to the August 2008 releases of the last three political prisoners -- including Kazulin himself -- would follow flawed elections. However, the UDF leaders seem to recognize that EU moves -- like the steps taken to date by the USG to suspend some sanctions for six months -- would likely only be temporary and would require renewal. They also confirmed to us their support for continued dialogue by the U.S. and EU with the GOB.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) It would not serve much purpose for the UDF and other opposition forces to seek a sudden consolidation of effort. Personality differences are strong; some factions have expressed interest in joining the UDF but only if at least one existing partner -- Sergey Kalyakin's Communist Party is most frequently cited -- is forced out. Kazulin has particular credibility and impact with UDF colleagues and others as well, including the "Malady Front" youth movement that consistently advocated an electoral boycott; if he chooses to exercise his authority, he could potentially become the central figure of the democratic opposition and bring others on board. However, with presidential elections not

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expected until 2011, there is no compelling reason to rush the process.

Comment Cont'd

¶7. (SBU) As a separate matter, we note with pleasure that the UDF finally recognized that participation in the elections is warranted (as we had strongly advocated in a number of public statements before the elections). Post will work with the strongest advocates of the boycott, especially Malady Front, to refresh our mutual understanding.

MOORE
CLOUD